

Warfare in the Byzantine World

DUMBARTON OAKS SYMPOSIUM, 30 APRIL – 2 MAY 2010

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War and the need to wage it, the organizational constraints it imposes, its effects on society and economy as well as its ideological justification and the debates it engenders, can be a radical force for social and political transformation. However unpleasant the effects of war, it is an undeniable fact of human history that war has been on many occasions and in many different historical contexts a powerful stimulus to both technological innovation and social and political change. The crucial role of war and its concomitants cannot be ignored in the history of any culture. Byzantium is no exception. Indeed, in many respects the history of the Byzantine state is also the history of its ability successfully to defend itself and to organize for war, for its military organization was central both to the inflection of its social relations in general as well as to the ways in which the central government extracted and redistributed the resources available to it, whether in the form of agricultural produce or money taxes on agriculture and trade.

In its thousand years of existence—from the reign of Anastasius (491–518) until that of the last emperor, Constantine XI (1448–1453)—the Byzantine state was almost constantly at war with one or another of its neighbors. This reflected its geography and strategic situation, centered as it was on the southern Balkans and Asia Minor. It had constantly to fend off challenges to its territorial integrity from the Persian and then Arab or Turkish Islamic powers to the east, or its Balkan or central European neighbors to the northwest and north. As the western and central European powers

grew and matured—first in the form of the Carolingian empire, then the German empire and the kingdom of Hungary—so Byzantine political pre-eminence came to be challenged, until by the end of the twelfth century the empire had become a second-rate state, subject to the power politics of powerful western kingdoms and the commercial strength of Italian merchant republics such as Venice, Genoa, and Pisa.

Byzantium was a society in which the virtues of peace were extolled and war was usually condemned, certainly when taken for its own sake. Fighting was to be avoided at all costs. Yet the empire nevertheless inherited the military administrative structures and, in many ways, the militaristic ideology of the expanding pre-Christian Roman Empire in its heyday. These tensions were overcome through the blending of Christian ideals with the political will to survive and the justification of war as a necessary evil, waged primarily in defense of the Roman world and the Orthodox faith. Late Roman and medieval Christian society in the eastern Mediterranean/south Balkan region thus generated a unique culture that was able to cling without reservation to a pacifistic ideal while at the same time legitimating and justifying the maintenance of an immensely efficient and, for the most part, remarkably effective military apparatus.

The symposium examined some of these themes in an attempt to re-evaluate Byzantine as well as other perceptions of warfare and the military, to understand how the Byzantines organized for war, and the reasons for their success or failure.

FRIDAY, 30 APRIL

Introduction

John F. Haldon · Princeton University

*The Big Picture: China, Byzantium
and the Shadow of the Steppe*

David Graff · Kansas State University

*The Small Picture: Government by
Exception and Exemption; Evidence
from the Later Byzantine Military*

Mark Bartusis · Northern State University

Fighting for Peace: The Legitimation of Warfare

Frank Trombley · Cardiff University

*A Conflicted Heritage: The Byzantine
Religious Establishment of a War Ethic*

John McGuckin · Union Theological
Seminary and Columbia University

*Byzantium Confronts its Neighbors:
Islam and the Crusaders*

John France · Swansea University

SATURDAY, 1 MAY

The Visual Representation of Peace

Lioba Theis · University of Vienna

The Art of War

Robert S. Nelson · Yale University

*The Paradoxes of Heroism in Byzantium:
Military Saints and Secular Warriors*

Anthony Kaldellis · Ohio State University

Resources, Warfare, and the Manzikert Campaign

John F. Haldon · Princeton University

The Medieval Logistics Project: Warfare on the Grid

Vince Gaffney · University of Birmingham

*Landscapes, Movement and Logistics: Multi-Agent
Systems and Simulating Medieval Campaigns*

Georgios Theodoropoulos · University of Birmingham

SUNDAY, 2 MAY

*War, Social Change and the Politics of Empire:
Prisoners of War between Slavery and Freedom*

Youval Rotman · Tel Aviv University

The Face of Protracted War

Walter Kaegi · University of Chicago

Concluding Remarks

John F. Haldon · Princeton University